

Phillips returns — Eaton released

ALAN Phillips, Wycombe Wanderers' skipper and centre back two years ago is back at the club. Alan signed on last week from Hendon and will be turning out at Loakes Park where he became a firm favourite during the 1974-75 season (writes Stuart Earp).

New manager Ted Powell, who takes over in July from Brian Lee, announced the capture to the 'Free Press' and also revealed that Ray Eaton, last season's regular left back, has been released by the club. Ray has joined Leatherhead.

Since his appointment as Wycombe manager in April, Ted has been busy watching players. So far only Phillips has actually signed but a new full back Bobby Davis from Carnegie College is expected to sign next week. Davis, who is touring with the Blues in Italy, has been highly recommended and is the replacement for Eaton.

Of the players in last season's squad, John Maskell, Peter Spittle, Paul Birdseye, Dave Bullock, Howard Kennedy and Mick Holfield have all put pen to paper and signed on for next term. But that still leaves several players who have yet to commit themselves. John Delaney, Keith Mead, Dave Alexander, Terry Reardon, Geoff Anthony, Dylan Evans, Tony Horsemann and Bruce Macrae have yet to sign on but Powell hopes to have

finalised his playing staff by next week.

The return of Alan Phillips throws a question mark over Delaney and Mead. Neither have signed at the moment and already four clubs have approached Keith for his signature — Hendon, Sutton, Leatherhead and Hayes. Obviously if both players stay with Wanderers it will mean competing for the centre back places and on last season's form, both players still have much to offer. Skipper Delaney had his critics after returning from Bournemouth but answered them all with some excellent displays. Mead, although below his brilliant best of two seasons ago (when he partnered Phillips), was still remarkably consistent and played in all 42 league matches. Overall, in fact, Keith played in 78 games last term. He would 'walk' into any other (Isthmian Leagues) and Wycombe must surely retain this valuable player for next season.

Wanderers fans must be pleased with the news of Phillips' return after one season with his former club Hendon. Alan, who lives in Henley, played a major role in Wycombe's magnificent 74-75 season when they reached the third round of the F.A. Cup and took the Rothmans Isthmian League title. With Mead, he formed the best centre back partnership in the league.

Ray Eaton's departure will surprise many people. At the start of the season he struggled to produce the form that won him several amateur international caps, but he improved enormously. An attacking left back, Ray continued the line of

top class defenders at Wycombe Wanderers, preceded by Roger Grant and Gary Hand.

Looking back on last season as a whole, Wanderers must have been both surprised and thrilled to finish runners-up — something that hardly looked likely at any time in the season. Second place was a marvellous feat and carried on the high standard of honours won by the club in the last eight years.

Their late season burst earned them some unexpected cash from the sponsors, too. Wanderers in fact finished as joint-top money winners for the season. They will receive a total of £1,165.72 from Rothmans — £500 for coming second, £465.72 from the sportsmanship pool and £400 for three clear goal victories. Dagenham also won the same amount.

Enfield, who eventually took the title by five points, forfeited their £1,000 prize money as did top goalscorers (outside the first three clubs) Tooting and Mitcham. Hitchin, with only one booking, took the major share of the sportsmanship pool (£543.34).

Going back to the start of the season, Wanderers had to start the defence of their title without two of their strikers. Keith Searle had left for Enfield while Malcolm Allison took Steve Perrin into professional football at Crystal Palace. Take two top forwards out of a team and it is difficult to plug the gap — as Wanderers discovered. Their strike power was never up to requirements at top level despite the efforts of Tony Horsemann, Dylan Evans and Geoff Anthony. Horsemann, at 34, worked harder than ever without

the luxury of being substituted late in the game. Once again, his vintage skills delighted the crowds and I, along with many others, hope he will be turning out in a Wycombe shirt next season. He is simply too good a goalscorer to retire.

For much of the season though, Wycombe had to struggle for goals and put pressure on the other departments. Despite this, they coped superbly. In midfield Terry Reardon was often at his best and his distribution was of the highest class. Terry was rewarded with a couple of memorable goals this year — and he won't score a better one than against Pistoiese in the Anglo-Italian Tournament.

Mick Holfield was brilliant at times and his speed and power shooting make him one of the most exciting players on the league circuit. Consistency is Mick's problem but he did a good job when switching to the front line to help out the attack. Compared with the previous season, Howard Kennedy never really reached his potential and seemed to lack confidence. The same could be said of Dave Alexander, who promised so much on occasions.

For me, it was Wycombe's defence that took the honours last season. Two new players fitted into the back four at the start, Delaney and Eaton, but they soon established themselves and made a firm platform on which to build. John Maskell enjoyed another excellent year in goal — probably one of his best ever, in fact — and was always reliable as the last line of defence.

Perhaps the most improved player last season though, was Paul Birdseye. For consistency, not many players could match him. He improved his only weakness, in the air, and his passing was excellent. Many would-be wingers felt his hard tackling and for my money, Paul was the player of the year at Loakes Park.

Of the other players, Dylan Evans proved us all wrong with his best-ever performance for Wycombe in the penultimate match against Dagenham. Dylan scored three super goals and looked in the £100,000 class. Sadly, he was infuriatingly inconsistent during the season — but I prefer to remember that Dagenham game! Geoff Anthony also came good in the end with several fine displays on the right wing. Both he and Evans worked hard to replace Searle and Perrin without ever succeeding.

Of the other players, Dave Bullock was played in goal, up front and at various positions in defence and as usual gave everything he had while Peter Spittle proved an admirable stand-in for Maskell. Bruce Macrae showed promise but needs more strength to succeed at this level.

Over the season there were a number of surprises. Brian Lee announced his retirement and then decided to stay on to finish the season while two of the club's officers resigned soon after the death of popular chairman Jack Smethurst. Ted Powell was announced as new manager and the club's programme topped a poll amongst R.I.L. clubs.

On the field, Wanderers again enjoyed a good run in the F.A.

Cup, resuming their battle with Bedford when they won after three exciting games. They met Cardiff away in the second round and went down by a single goal. On the day they deserved to take the Welshmen back to Loakes Park and we shall all wonder what would have happened had Evans scored and not hit the upright in the first 10 minutes.

There's not much doubt as to the best performance of the season. The football against Dagenham was quite remarkable and as good as you could hope to see on any ground in the country, be it professional or amateur. On the debit side, Slough managed to win four times against the Blues, including the 1-0 defeat at Loakes Park which ended a two year unbeaten home league record. The goalless draw at Clapton is best forgotten although as John Delaney said of the pitch afterwards — "Even Rommel couldn't have played out there!"

There's still plenty to keep the fans on their toes before next season too, with the Anglo-Italian Tournament games in Italy coming up in two weeks' time. With two wins under their belts, Wanderers are in with a chance of reaching the final if they can produce some good results and cope with the Italian officials. Don't forget I'll be sending back reports of the games against Pistoiese and Teramo plus any other news.

It is only fitting to end this review of the season with a tribute to Brian Lee, Wycombe's retiring manager. In eight years at the club, Brian has brought the club unprecedented success and given us all some marvellous footballing memories.